

Florence Thomas – View-Master Artist

by John M. Clement, Revised Nov 2017

View-Master owed a large amount of its success to the various children's entertainment reels. Florence Thomas was the first and probably the greatest 3D artist in the View-Master studios. She was certainly the most prolific. She originated many of the techniques for making stunningly beautiful 3D reels between the late 1940s and the early 1970s. Not much is published about her life, but her artistic life and development are clearly shown in the beautiful View-Master pictures she created. Her artistry certainly contributed to the View-Master success. She started work at Sawyers in 1944 and retired in 1971, but some of her work still came out in 1975.

Florence was a master sculptor and made the miniature figurines out of clay. She painted them with appropriate colors and fabric patterns. She also created the dioramas and arranged the lighting. Tom Dixon and Roland Smith photographed the earliest table top dioramas. From the photo evidence they first photographed the left then the right eye view, shifting the camera in between exposures. The order of the picture taking can be clearly seen in some reels with candles because the left view shows a longer unburned part.



The Emperor's New Clothes (parallel viewing, left view on L)

Between the two exposures she would also shift and rotate some items to enhance the 3D effect.

Her artistry changed with time. The six earliest reels had a slightly funky primitive look with great vitality and strongly expressed emotions. The figurines were created by Hollywood artists and Florence worked on the dioramas and wrote the booklets, but she created the 1948 figurines. All of her 1946 and 1948 dioramas have a beautifully painted background and great depth.



1946 FT04 Snow White 7 “Snow White consents to marry prince”

By contrast the final scene in her 1955 3 reel packet has figurines by Ms. Thomas. The figures are much more realistic and include the 3 faithful animal companions. The foliage is much more natural and the background has all 3D imagery. The figurines are more like Meissen porcelain without the cartoonish quality of the Hollywood artists.



1955 FT04C Snow White 7 “Snow White rode away to marry the prince”

The previous scene just after she awoke does show some happiness, but the prince and Snow White have more ambiguous expressions. This scene is more intimate with larger figures in its presentation with only hints of great depth.



1955 FT04C Snow White 6 "The apple fell from her lips and she awoke!"

The Snow White set clearly shows her skill at sculpting cute pets. One gets the feeling that she loved cats and dogs. She even sneaked them into some of her bible stories. The account by Mary Ann Sell says that in retirement Florence gardened while watched by her beloved cat.



1948 Christmas Story "All travel together"

A personal favorite with pets is from her early set of Nursery Rhymes



1950 MG2 Mother Goose 6 “There was an old woman who lived in a shoe”

Her “Puss in Boots” packet allowed her free reign in crafting the crafty cat.



1968 B3201 Puss in Boots 01 “All the miller's youngest son inherited was a cat”

She had a genius for squeezing in all of the details of a story within a single reel, or even a single picture. Notice the other verses appear in this picture.



1950 MG3 Mother Goose 4 "Sing a song of sixpence"

When the pie was opened,
The birds began to sing;
Wasn't that a dainty dish,
To set before the king?

The king was in his counting house,
Counting out his money;
The queen was in the parlour,
Eating bread and honey.

The maid was in the garden,
Hanging out the clothes,
When down came a blackbird
And pecked off her nose.

Her work was very carefully and beautifully crafted. With all the many thousands of pictures she created only a few with obvious goofs. By shifting objects from one picture to another there are sometimes evident artifacts. This happens several times in her 1946 Fairy Tales and her 1948 Christmas story. The foliage in some of the fairy tales had dramatically different shading. The shadow just behind the right shepherd's head is much deeper on the left frame.



1948 GXM-2 Christmas Story 1 "The Shepherds keep Watch"

The pike in the following scene was apparently shifted and one piece of seaweed moved the wrong way. The strand to the left in front of the pike appears to be embossed inside him. The effect is on the edge and is very subtle. For the readers who can't "freeview" parallel, the left picture should show the seaweed much farther to the right if it is in front of the pike. This may be her only Disney set of reels.



1963 B3162 Sword in the Stone 10 ""Use your magic Merlin"-"Use your brain" Merlin replied"

Florence created all kinds of stories from fairy tales, classic stories, bible stories to Disney movie stories. Here is a picture from her "Aesop's Fables" packet. The dog has seen a reflection of his own bone in the pond. He thinks it is bigger so he jumps in to get it and loses his original bone. It must be seen in 3D to appreciate the great 3D artistry.



1959 B3091 Aesop's Fables 6 ...And jumped in losing his own bone

An example of a contemporary story set is the Tom Corbett packet based on a space opera character in radio and movie plays. Notice that Dr. Dale is using a 3D camera!



1954 Tom Corbett 970B 4 “Dr Dale shoots planet-broken-into-asteroids carvings”

The art of 3D photography is very different from conventional flat picture taking. The frame should always be in front of objects at the edges because they look strange and have difficult to view cut off edges. Objects in the middle can come forward in front of the frame, but this can easily become tiring to view if done frequently. View-Master slides generally were carefully aligned to put everything behind the frame. There is one example of where one of Florence’s pictures violated this convention to make Tiny Tim and Scrooge look extremely welcoming by having them in front of the frame holding arms toward you.

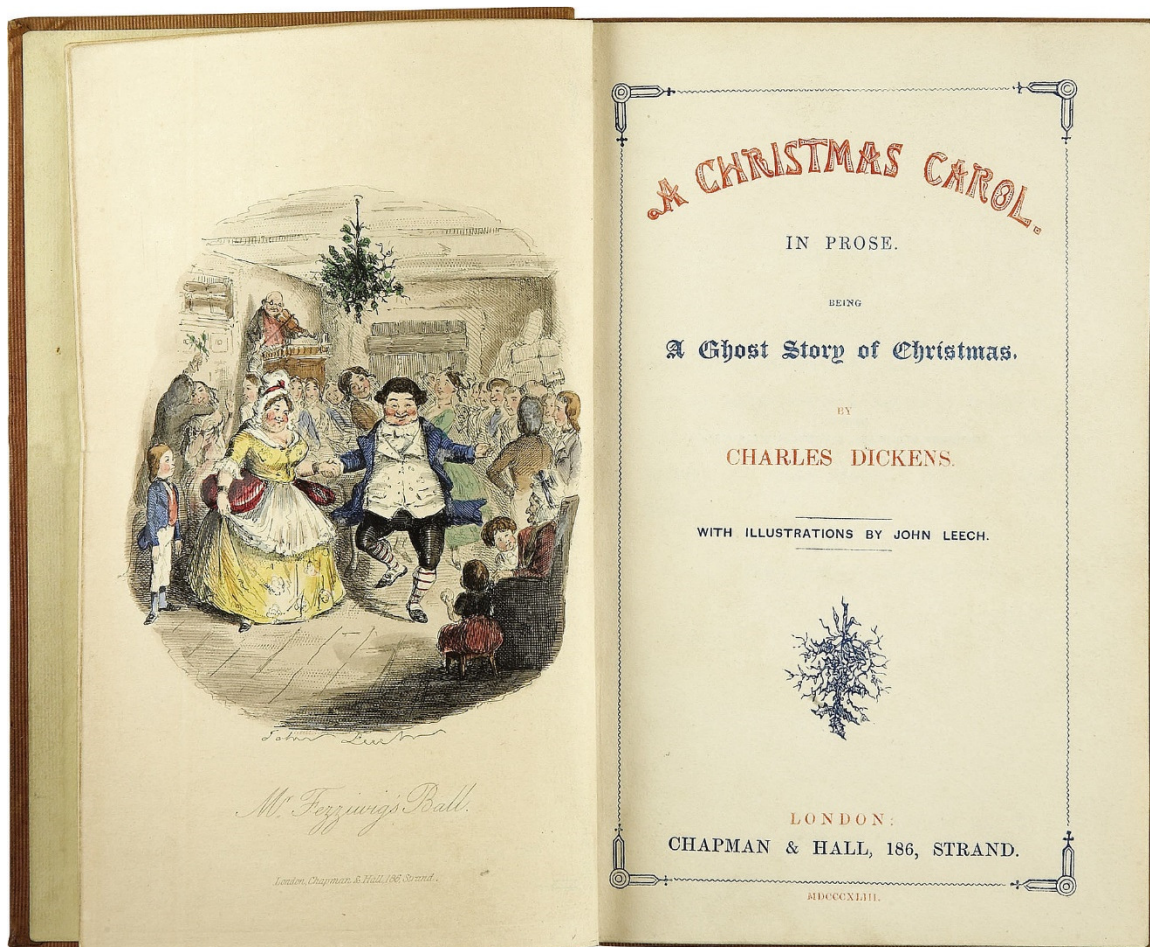


1956 FT31C Christmas Carol 7 “‘God bless us, everyone’ Tiny Tim said happily”

All of her creations are beautiful and some beautifully interpret classic drawings. In the same Christmas Carol packet Mr. Fezziwig's ball has the essentials of the often reproduced original classic drawing, but adds some details. Notice the drinker, the muncher, and the whirling dancers. To a dancer it evokes a real ball.



1956 FT31A Christmas Carol 6 "He saw again Mr Fezziwig's Christmas ball"



Frontspiece of the first edition (from Wikipedia)

Her “Alice in Wonderland” and “Through the Looking Glass” evoke the original John Tenniel drawings, not the Disney movies.



1952 FT20B Alice in Wonderland 3 “It's a Cheshire cat,' said the Duchess”



Alice par John Tenniel (Wikimedia Commons)

If I were to pick one picture which I like the most, “Mr Fezziwig’s Ball” would come out near the top.

One that I find also appeals the most is the winter scene from “The Ugly Duckling”. It is typical of her early work with a sweeping deep vista. The duckling is taking shelter and the whole scene evokes the long winters of my childhood in upstate NY.



Figure 1 1948 FT09 Ugly Duckling 6 “It shivers too numb to move”

Her most sensuous picture is from one of her “Bible Heroes” stories.



1967 C B8521 Bible Heroes 2 “His Philistine wife, Delilah coaxed from his secret...”

One often wonders what it would be like to sit down and talk to her. Unfortunately the pictures only give hints of what she might have been like. I personally think they show a very private person who was a true artist. Her figurines and dioramas were all made of impermanent materials. In particular the figurines were probably never fired at high temperatures for permanence. Just like many theater and movie sets the physical artwork was not valued at the time so most of it was discarded. All we have are the final published beautiful pictures. Fortunately all of her work was originally published using Kodachrome film stock which has an extremely long life, so her work can still be enjoyed and acquired on the used market. The later View-Master reels after 1977 were all on inferior stock which turns red in about 20 years. It has been reported, that View-Master discarded all of the original large format slides in the 1970s, so

new high quality reprints are now impossible. Both the physical artwork and the original slides would fetch fancy prices now, but they threw it all out.

Several known pictures and a video of her at work survive with one of them published by View-Master in 3D.



Circa 1954 A Tour of Sawyer's View-Master Plant 2 Fairy tales come alive

This is the original picture in the “Christmas Tour of Sawyers” made in the early 1950s. There is a reprint for the NSA meeting in 1989 and still available new on impermanent film stock. The reprint was made from a reel, not the original slide, and as a result it has lots of noise, poorer color, with little fine detail.

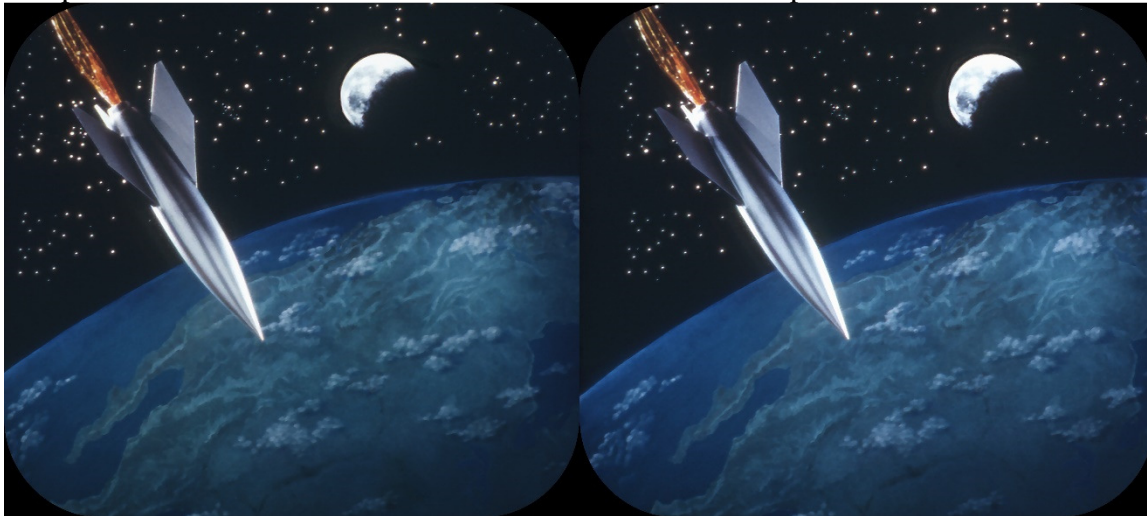
The shot shows her with works in progress in her studio. Above the cabinet in the back you can clearly see various houses to be recycled into new dioramas. On the right of the houses it looks like some backgrounds for her ABC Alphabet Circus. The spaceship behind her on the right is from the penultimate picture in the Tom Corbett packet. The diorama on the right and the one in the center appear in her “Snow White” 3 reel packet. The figures to the left by the books are resting while awaiting being put on stage. According to an interview on the Sawyers Story film it took her a year to finish a reel packet. Of course she would be working on several reels simultaneously.

The diorama in the center of the previous picture is actually is an incomplete work in progress. The final picture had the same figures, but different shutters and curtains.



1955 FT04C Snow White 3 ““Silly goose!” said the Queen, "It's all right, I'll eat half!"”

The penultimate Tom Corbett scene as shown in her workshop.



1954 Tom Corbett 970C 6 “The Polaris returns to Earth with secrets of anti-gravity”

Some of the fun of her reels is to observe at how she varied the presentations. She recycled the same figurines in different scenes, but changed the angle to disguise the similarity. She also used the same houses with just a bit of redecoration, especially in her early reels. It is also a pleasure to see how her work evolved with time. Some of the earliest reels were redone by her several years later in a very different style. With her beautiful renditions of fairy tales why did View-Master later redo some of her reels with different artists? There is no accounting for tastes, fashions, and corporate profit.

Wolfgang Sell kindly provided the following 3D pictures of Florence with some of her creations.



Florence Thomas in front of showcase of her art, circa 1970
3D photo by Cliff Bond, Hank Gaylord, Digitization-Wolfgang Sell, Restoration-J. Clement



Florence Thomas with some of her bible figures, Circa 1970
3D photo by Cliff Bond, Hank Gaylord, Digitization-Wolfgang Sell, Restoration-J. Clement

While her reels contain no graphic violence and are extremely G rated, she could create creepy effects. The following picture from her Snow White packet is one of the creepiest View-Master pictures I have seen.



FT04C Snow White 2 The Queen poisons an apple to kill Snow White

The following picture shows how she used paper cutouts to evoke a cartoon effect while the foreground is fully sculpted. To my knowledge she never repeated this effect although she did use paper cutouts in constructing some items in dioramas.



1963 B3161 Sword in the Stone 01 "A wondrous sword appeared; None could pull it out"

Florence working with the photographers used double exposures to achieve ghostly transparent effects and this is done frequently to good effect in the Arabian Nights series. The glittering palaces, profuse gardens, and fantastic geniis make this my favorite series.



1951 FT-51 Magic Carpet 2 “Seven centuries have I lain in this jar”

There are many beautiful View-Master scenes lying in wait on the used reel market by Florence and other artists. There are also a number of digitized reels on the web including YouTube. Some of the post 1976 reels which have all turned red have been restored and are only available in the original color on the web. Fortunately all of Florence’s pictures are available in unfaded glorious Kodachrome. View-Master was originally designed for family pleasure and not just children. The pleasures of Florence’s pictures can be enjoyed by all.

The View-Master pictures used in this document were all restored by the author. Some information came from the book “View-Master Memories” by Mary Ann Sell, Wolfgang Sell, and Charley Van Pelt, 2007. The book was researched by interviews with View-Master employees during the 1990s. It contains a long article on Ms. Thomas, and has lots of details about the other View-Master artists as well as history of the company.

A Partial List of Florence Thomas' Work

1. 1946 FT-1 Little Red Riding Hood, figurines by Hollywood artists
2. 1946 FT-2 Hansel and Gretel, figurines by Hollywood artists
3. 1946 FT-3 Jack and the Beanstalk, figurines by Hollywood artists
4. 1946 FT-4 Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, figurines by Hollywood artists
5. 1946 FT-5 Cinderella, figurines by Hollywood artists
6. 1946 FT-6 Goldilocks and the Three Bears, figurines by Hollywood artists
7. 1948 FT-7 The Three Little Pigs
8. 1948 FT-8 Little Black Sambo
9. 1948 FT-9 The Ugly Duckling
10. 1948 XM-1,2,3 The Christmas Story
11. 1950 EA-1,2,3 The Easter Story
12. 1950 MG-1,2,3 Mother Goose
13. 1951 FT-50 Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp, 2 reels
14. 1951 FT-51 The Magic Carpet
15. 1952 FT-1b Little Red Riding Hood
16. 1952 FT-2B Hansel and Gretel
17. 1952 FT-3B Jack and the Beanstalk
18. 1952 FT-20 Alice in Wonderland, packet
19. 1952 FT-30 The Night before Christmas
20. 1953 FT-5 Cinderella
21. 1953 FT-10 Sleeping Beauty
22. 1953 FT-11 The Pied Piper
23. 1953 FT-12 Thumbelina
24. 1954 970A, B, C Tom Corbett Space Cadet, packet
25. 1955 FT-4A,B,C Snow White packet
26. 1955 FT-13 Rumpelstiltskin
27. 1955 FT-25 Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer
28. 1956 FT-31 A Christmas Carol packet
29. 1957 B3191 The Little Red Hen (packet with Thumbelina, Pied Piper)
30. 1957 FT45 The Wizard of Oz
31. 1958 B3051 The Little Mermaid, Anderson's Fairy Tales packet
32. 1958 B3052 The Steadfast Tin Soldier
33. 1958 B3053 The Emperor's New Clothes
34. 1959 B309 Aesop's Fables, packet
35. 1960 B312 The Elves and the Shoemaker, Grimm's Fairy Tales packet
36. 1960 B410 Mother Goose Rhymes
37. 1961 B411 ABC Circus, packet
38. 1962 B412 1-2-3 Farm, packet
39. 1962 B901 The Seven Wonders of the World, packet with Lelia Heath, Frank Visage
40. 1963 B316 The Sword in the Stone, packet
41. 1965 B851 Noah's Ark, packet
42. 1967 B852 Bible Heroes, packet
43. 1970 B853 Moses and the Plagues of Egypt, packet with Mary Lewis
44. 1972 B854 Moses and the Ten Commandments, packet
45. 1975 B364 Alice Through the Looking Glass, packet

Some of the later reels credited the artists, but often it is not possible to discover exactly who did what. Other View-Master artists also created very nice reels in different styles. Many reels are available at reasonable prices on the used market. A number of reels have been reissued with different numbering, but the title and copyright dates remained the same so it is sometimes possible to determine the contents. Beware of all copyrights after 1977 and some in 1977 as they have turned red. Beware of GAF reissues because if manufactured after 1977 they may have turned red. Always inquire about GAF reels as to whether they have turned red.

If you really want pictures on post 1977 reels, that have turned red, it is possible to scan them and correct the color using the Kodak Digital ROC plugin, or the scanner software color restoration. A high resolution flatbed scanner can be used and the free Stereo Photo Maker can properly align the 3D images. The sharpness can best be improved using Focus Magic. The hard part is locating and removing each defect. When viewed in 3D using Stereo Photo Maker the defects are obvious so a competent, reasonably priced, photo editor such as Paint Shop Pro can be used to fix them. When scanned at 6400dpi and corrected in several passes by Focus Magic, near 4K resolution can be achieved.

If you wish to view these in good 3D you can buy the reels used from various sources or print the pictures and cut them to 7 inch wide cards. They will fit into a Holmes stereoscope which is available either as a kit or assembled from many stores on the web. JC